First Ladies Of The Air

A Special Tribute: In 1900 One Third Of The Telegraphers Were Women, But Who Was First?

By R.B. Sturtevant, KD7KTS

We do not know, and probably never will, who was the first woman to transmit over a "wireless set." This is because before 1912 nobody was licensing or keeping records of who was using radio to communicate.

We *do* know, however, that a great number of women had been working as telegraphers since before the Civil War. It's estimated that as many as a *third* of telegraphers in 1900 were women. So there was never a shortage of women who were able to sit at the key. We also know that the first woman wireless operator was stepping outside the realm of what that post-Victorian society considered "appropriate ladylike behavior." In fact, as late as 1920 *Radio Amateur News* published and article by an anonymous radio operator who refused to give her name or callsign.

Trailblazers

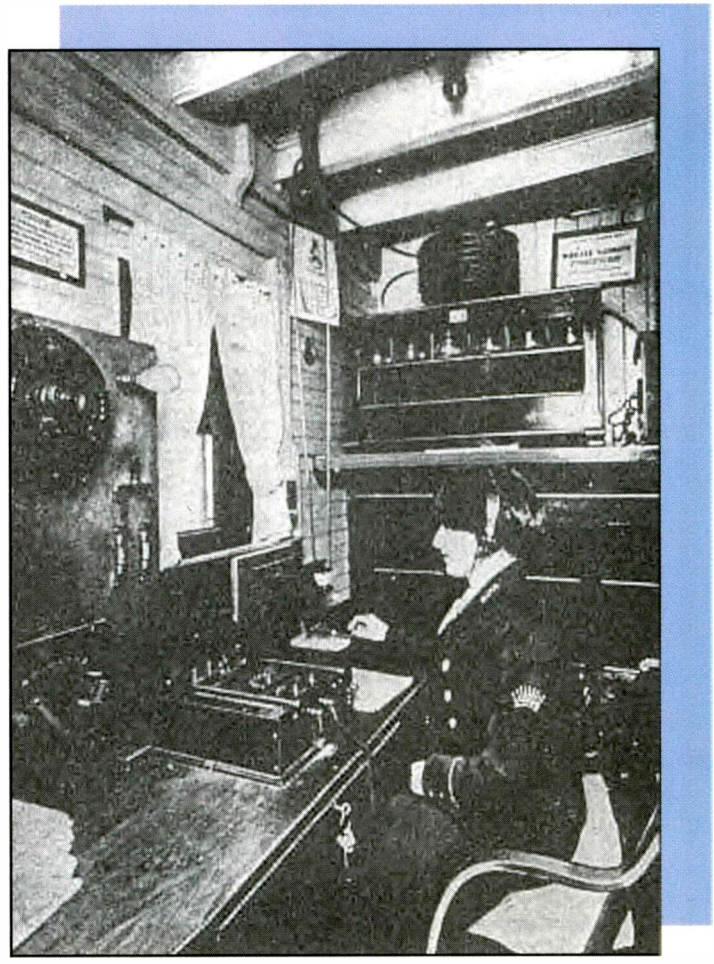
Among the first women of radio was Graynella Packer who, after working at a shore station in Sanford, Florida, for two years, shipped out aboard the steamship *S.S. Mohawk*. Credited with being the first female wireless operator to go to sea, Packer served from November 1910 until April 1911.

Another, a Boston lady whose name is not recorded, is said to have applied for a job as a wireless operator aboard a ship but was told that it could not possibly hire her. After the sinking of the *Titanic*, ships were required to carry two radio operators. The ship she applied to already had one male wireless operator, with whom they were very happy, and all wireless men bunked together. Not to be put off by mere company policy, the lady simply married the current wireless operator and the couple spent their honeymoon at sea.

A Proper Lady!

It was extremely difficult for a proper lady to get the training needed to work as a wireless operator. Because most ships, or houses for that matter, didn't have AC current running everywhere, she needed to learn about small engines that drove generators, as well as the generators themselves. Morse was required, of course, as was construction and maintenance of the set, the building of antennas (no simple feat in that primitive day), the handling of atmospheric electricity, and a myriad of other things we today take for granted.

The real problem, of course, was that many men didn't take them seriously. One woman, inspired by Miss Packer, applied for a job with a steamship company and was told that one of her duties would be a daily climb into the ship's rigging to grease the antenna wires so the signal could "shove off" faster. Left-handed Monkey Wrench jokes aside, it was difficult in those days for a "nice girl" to walk up to a radio operator and say, "Can I have a look at your apparatus."



Graynella Packer aboard the S.S. Mohawk. (Photo courtesy Radio Amateur News, March 1920)

Sixteen In 1916

Nevertheless, determined and virtuous women did overcome these obstacles. In 1916 *Electronic Experimenter* did a feature article on then 16-year-old Kathleen Parkin who had a license from the Department of Commerce since 15, and who had built and was operating her own station. She pushed a 1/4-kW signal using the callsign 6SO and was a strong advocate of radio. And she had no problem with telling errant operators what was what. Morse code did hide the fact that she was a 16-year-old girl, but she did what needed to be done. Kathleen even set up

The 15-year-old Kathleen Parkin, Expert Radio Operator, made her own equipment (Photo courtesy Radio Amateur News, March 1920)

a wireless station in San Rafael, California's Dominican College to help instruct physics classes where she attended high school.

Yonkers Woman Was Self Taught

One of the most focused amateur operators of this period would have to be Mrs. Alexander MacKenzie. A member of the New York State Women's Suffrage Party, this Yonkers woman had her son install a wireless setup in her home with an antenna on the roof. She had taught herself to send and receive messages to a limited extent. During the summer of 1915 she would fire up her station three times a day and send out the message, "VOTES FOR WOMEN." Her signal carried 400 miles and her replies ranged from GOOD FOR YOU OLD LADY and WE ARE WITH YOU to OH, PIFFLE and some that would not be appropriate for a refined magazine like this one. Mrs. MacKenzie answered all comers with a Morse code speech on how she had grown old waiting for the right to vote.

On election night in 1916, when American men were re-electing Woodrow Wilson, the Suffragettes held a 24-hour demonstration in Yonkers' Mansion Square. Above the speakers' platform a wireless station was set up to receive messages from various celebrities and prominent suffragettes. Mrs. MacKenzie was there at her key. One can only hope that she was still at a key to send out the word in 1920 that she cast her first vote.

By 1916 wireless instruction was being included in studies at girl's camps and business schools, including the famous Hunter College. It seems that women were finding jobs working for large department stores. In a day that knew little about long-distance telephone calls, radio got the orders out.

Soon enough, however, maritime laws would *exclude* women from serving as radio operators on seagoing vessels. Nevertheless, when Hudson Navigation Company announced that radios would be installed on their largest vessels on the Hudson River passenger service, women radio operators figured prominently in their plans. And, of course, ladies serving at shore stations for the merchant marine were not affected by maritime law.

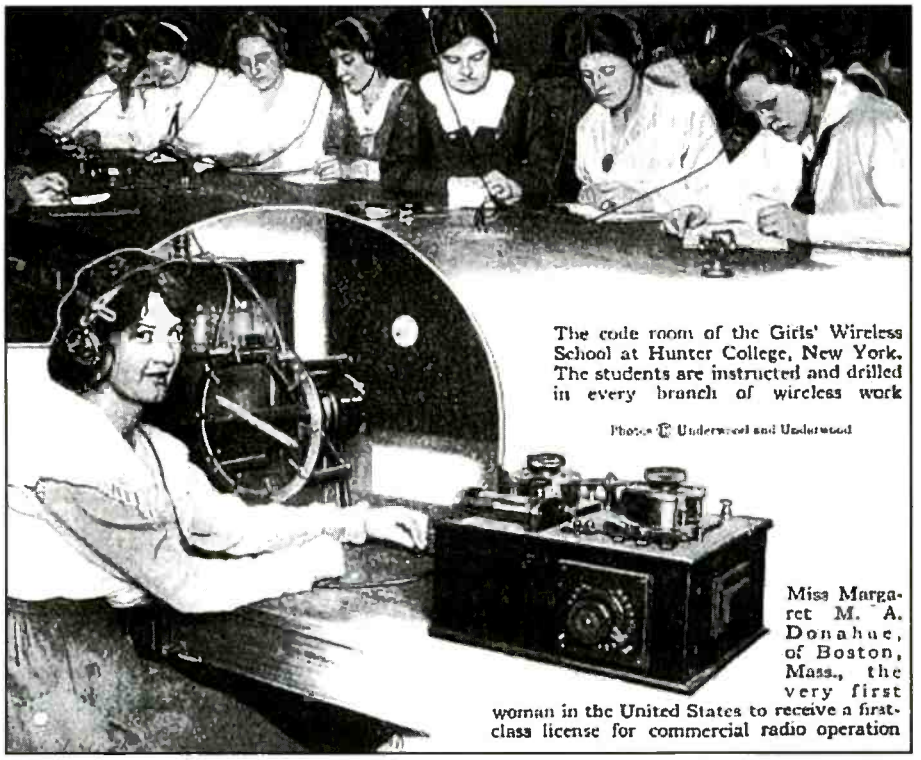
Amateurs?

So, what did a woman have to do to get an amateur license? Same as anyone else back then, of course. They had to apprentice themselves to another amateur and show two years of good operation. At that point a *provisional* license was issued. If a Department of Commerce Radio Division inspector came by they could have their license upgraded, but it was not required. Licenses were renewable without charge after two years.

If a person, male or female, wanted a first grade amateur or first grade commercial license he or she had to go to one of 10 Department of Commerce radio inspectors offices: Washington D.C., four others on the east coast, Chicago, Detroit, New Orleans, Seattle, or San Francisco. The applicant was then given a two-hour exam that included a Morse code test, requiring sending and receiving at 12 words per minute. Drawing a diagram of a transmitter was required, as was giving an accurate description of a radio station hook-up.

The difference between a first and second class amateur license was an inspection of the transmitter and receiver used by the amateur. Without the inspection, a second class license was issued. Margaret

Some of the patriotic young women studying radio telegraphy at a summer preparedness camp. (Photo courtesy The Electrical Experimenter, October 1916)


The code room of the Girls' Wireless School at Hunter College, New York. The students are instructed and drilled in every branch of wireless work
Photos © Underwood and Underwood
Miss Margaret M. A. Donahue, of Boston, Mass., the very first woman in the United States to receive a first-class license for commercial radio operation

The magazine called it "a preparedness move in the right direction" as these "feminine radio operators" copied messages as they arrived.(Photo courtesy The Electrical Experimenter, October 1916)

M.A. Donahue was the first woman to earn a Commercial license.

Pioneering Patriots

As World War I loomed on the horizon, women, like everyone else, looked for ways to do their patriotic bit. Many joined the Naval Reserve and served on shore stations as radio operators. They usually handled messages like, "TESTING GOING ON 43K CALLING 96E. LOUD 500 CYCLE NOTE JAMMING. CONFIRM." But they were on the air and doing their part.

At the beginning of the war, the Department of Commerce sealed all civilian radio transmitters. The only radio frequencies being used were reserved for the Army's Signal Corps or the Navy. Many of those military transmitting stations were "manned" by women. Their work may have been mundane, even dull, but they had the satisfaction of freeing a brother radio operator for duty at sea or in combat. To paraphrase the poet: They also serve who only stay at home and monitor the frequencies. ■

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